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FOR FAITH AND ACTION

October 2015

Masks

Pass me not

Let in the light

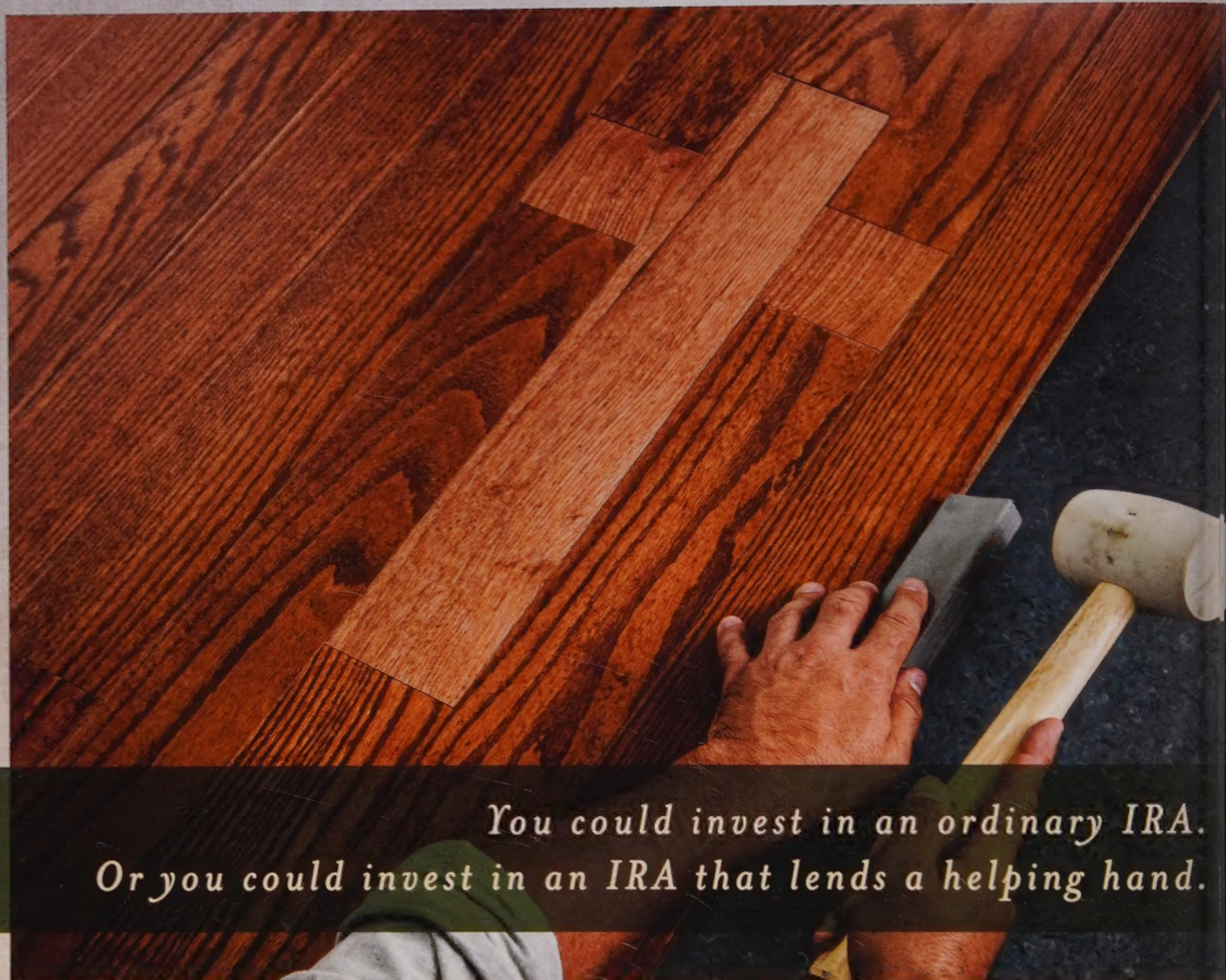
Slow down for justice

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SLOW FAITH

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All time is holy and human beings are meant to live in sacred sync with God's rhythms.

- | | | |
|----|-------------------------------------|--|
| 6 | Masks | Who is this woman with the untidy eyebrows? <i>Christa von Zychlin</i> |
| 12 | Let the light in | I wasn't broken irreparably. <i>Cara Strickland</i> |
| 18 | Slow down for justice | With racism, we miss what we're not looking for. <i>Judith Roberts</i> |
| 22 | Pass me not | In making others invisible, we miss seeing Jesus. <i>Violet Cucciniello Little</i> |
| 33 | From victim to survivor | Domestic violence affects people in all walks of life. <i>Rhonda Campbell Clay</i> |
| 38 | To bless the world around us | Following in the way of St. Francis is discipleship. <i>Kim Winchell</i> |

DEPARTMENTS

- | | | |
|----|---|---|
| 4 | Voices | Slowing down <i>Kate Sprutta Elliott</i> |
| 5 | Give us this day | Moving forward <i>Candice Hill Buchbinder</i> |
| 10 | Let us pray | Nurturing as prayer <i>Julie K. Aageson</i> |
| 16 | Family matters | Me, myself and God <i>Sue Gamelin</i> |
| 26 | Bible study
Slow faith | Session 2 Make haste, O Lord
Countless prayers arise from the psalmist's voice asking God, "How long?"
<i>Liv Larson Andrews</i> |
| 32 | Leader's guide | <i>Liv Larson Andrews</i> |
| 36 | Earth wise | Easy <i>Terry L. Bowes</i> |
| 41 | Grace notes | Everything is so previous <i>Linda Post Bushkofsky</i> |
| 42 | Amen! | Slow enough to grow <i>Catherine Malotky</i> |

PLUS ...

- | | | |
|----|-------------------------------------|---|
| 43 | Directory of Reader Services | Subscription, editorial and advertising information |
|----|-------------------------------------|---|

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VOICES

Slowing down

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

In this month's Bible study session, "Make haste, O Lord," author Liv Larson Andrews writes: "To experience an unplanned wait becomes frozen time. God's people waited for God to act on many occasions.... God's people waited for help, freedom, and an end to their suffering. Over and over they asked God, 'Did you just forget about us?'"

This year, I've asked that question frequently. I've been on a long medical leave. I learned the hard way about being forced to slow down and wait. I think I know something about "frozen time" now. Even today, some of my medical issues are not entirely resolved, but I am getting better at living with uncertainty.

One of the most important lessons I learned on this journey was how to ask for help. It's not easy. We are in a culture that encourages us to "do it ourselves." Admitting we can't do something and need assistance is seen by many as a sign of weakness.

Sue Gamelin's column this month, "Me, myself and God," describes having surgery on her hand that left her temporarily disabled and reliant on her husband for simple tasks, such as tying her shoes or buttering her English muffin. She reminds us that "Trying to do everything without help is an arrogant goal. Relying upon the gifts of others is what it means to be part of a family, part of the human family.... Equally vital are the wisdom and witness we receive from each other as we grow."

Part of the "wisdom and witness we receive from each other" is how we strive

for justice for all of the human family. In "Slow down for justice," Judith Roberts writes about her son, Myles, a young African American man. She challenges us to recognize how "racism dehumanizes people of color by not seeing their intrinsic worth." She recognizes that she cannot shield Myles from the realities of racism. But she says, "When it feels like he's carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, I will continue to let him know I've got his back. I will remind him he's not alone and encourage him to join with others striving for justice in the world. When there is nothing more I can do to say to make the hurt go away, I will *slow down* from my busyness and just listen."

I learned during my illness that sometimes we need to slow down to recognize the grace of God in unexpected even painful situations. God will surprise you even on difficult days.

Violet Cucciniello Little serves at the Welcome Church, a drop-in center that serves street people in Philadelphia. Violet assures us that "God's grace corrects the vision of our hearts. God's grace is the only way we will see the diversity of the world in all its beauty. It's the only way we can acknowledge all parts of God's body and stand with those who are vulnerable or in pain. It is the only way to move toward healing our broken world."

Speaking of healing our brokenness, I want to thank everyone who prayed for me during my illness. It was a witness to the power of the body of Christ and it meant the world to me. 🌿

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Gather*.



GIVE US THIS DAY

Moving Forward

by Candice Hill Buchbinder

By the time you read

this, my husband and I will have been empty-nesters for about six weeks. One and done. That's how we jokingly refer to our role as parents of an only child. We had more than 18 years to help mold, shape and guide this young man. Did we get it right? What did we miss? Have I savored these days and years, or have I just moved through parenthood trying to solve and survive each day?

I've tried to prepare myself for this time since the day he was born. Those first days and weeks were filled with feedings and questions about sleep patterns and positions—back, side, stomach—which is right? I held him in my arms and wondered where the time was going. And he was only six weeks old!

As years passed, there were more questions. Who had the best educational philosophy to nurture his desire to learn and his independence, yet show him how to work with others and share ideas? And that was only for preschool.

As our son approached kindergarten, we were faced with what seemed at the time to be the most important question we would face as parents, one that would influence his education for years to come: Do we hold him back? Or do we send him on? For parents of boys with late summer birthdays, this seems to be a common quandary. Should we give our child another year to mature? That wasn't the only question we asked ourselves as we considered the best path to take, but in the end we opted to hold him back.

The kindergarten teacher asked if we preferred that, when the time came, he would be the first one in his class to get his driver's license or the last one. I also remember thinking: He'll be 19 before he goes to college—we'll have him with us an extra year.

Now it's time to send him on his way. An only child myself, I recall the day I left for college. My car was packed, keys in hand. My father, sitting in his chair at the kitchen table, began to pray and then broke down in tears. His only child was leaving home.

What got my parents through that day? Faith, prayer and the confidence that God would look after me. My parents' faith was the foundation of all they passed along to me. I, in turn, have tried to pass that along to my child.

I guess I worry whether he's prepared for the unexpected twists and turns. There will be moments for him, as for us all, when he may doubt himself and even doubt that God is there. My prayer is that we've laid a foundation of faith for him to know he is never alone. I pray he experiences the hope that will guide him to fulfill his promise.

In my heart I want to hold my son back, to slow things down. I'm not quite ready to walk into his room to say goodnight only to realize he's not there. But by the time we drop him off, I'll be ready. It's not the end of our role as parents, rather a new beginning for us as well. 🌸

Candice Hill Buchbinder is a public relations and media specialist for the ELCA.



Masks

by Christa von Zychlin

In hindsight, I'm sure it was an awful princess mask—but on that Halloween night, in the full confidence of a 5-year-old, I knew it made me look stunning. Shiny hair, high cheekbones, and at last, I was the proud possessor of a small perky nose. A plastic crown for my head and pink nylon gown (worn over a sturdy warm jacket) and the lovely new me was complete.

"Oh, what a pretty princess," neighbors cooed when I arrived at their doors. I felt confident, tall and elegant.

Until old Mrs. B. peered at me with cloudy eyes and asked, "Who are you supposed to be?"

"I'm a princess," I declared.

Ignoring my words, but responding to the familiarity of my voice, Mrs. B. exclaimed, "Oh, little Christa from down the street. Happy Halloween." I was indignant until she dropped not one but two popcorn balls in my bag. Mrs. B. knew me, and she knew her homemade popcorn balls were my favorite.

This leads me to a philosophical question: Is it better to be beautiful—or to be known? And can we ever truly be both?

Facebook foibles

Fast forward a few decades. Who is that lady with the creases in her forehead, circles under her eyes and a lumpy double chin?

Oh no! It's me.

I've reached an age where it's often a shock what stares at me from the mirror. Sometimes I accidentally flip my phone camera into "selfie" mode, giving a close-up view of every pore and blemish. Ugh—I can't switch that camera around fast enough.

My youngest son, meanwhile, thinks it's charming to sneak up and take my photo when I'm concentrating on a work project—*click*, goes his phone camera in my face. Another time I might be asking who left the

milk out and why there are crumbs all over the counter. *Click*, my exact expression is preserved forever. My first instinct is to grab that phone and delete, delete, delete. But then I stop and look at the snapshots. Do I always wear such a scowl when I'm concentrating? Is this the face my husband and children usually see, when I'm in at-home mode with them? Is this the real me?

Humbled with humor

Looking at my untidy eyebrows and twisted expression, even I have to laugh. "Please don't post that," I beg. My son knows me and loves me. He helps me to laugh at myself ... and he doesn't post those awful photos anywhere (as far as I know). He helps humble me with humor.

Still I have to ask, is this who I really am, when all masks are off? Scowly, double-chinned and so frumpy-serious?

A few months ago I posted a new photo of myself on Facebook, which received over 100 "likes." The soft light hides most of my wrinkles, and the tilt of my head conceals the double chin. To tell the truth, the photo doesn't even look a lot like me. So why did I choose it?

Is my Facebook photo a mask I show to the world, or is it a photo that best represents the me I want to be? Am I being a fake or am I just experimenting with the smiling, confident, young-in-spirit, loving God and blessing-the-world woman I'm still *practicing* to be?

On the other hand, as Halloween rolls around each year, I now usually opt for a witch's costume, rather than that of a princess. For one thing, much less makeup is needed—hardly any, actually.

Voice masks

Not only our faces wear masks—but sometimes our voices do as well.

An example is the honeyed voice I often use when I answer the phone. I may be in the middle of an argument (yes, it happens!) or a rant about my day at work,

and then the phone rings and I answer with sugar on my tongue, “Oh, HELLLOOO.” It’s a voice mask, and most of you know exactly what I mean. Suddenly you are the bright professional or the cheerful church volunteer, leaving the person right in front of you (spouse, child or close friend) dizzy from the sudden change in demeanor.

Is this hypocrisy? Or are you and I practicing to be who God made us to be? As a Christian, is it all right to “fake it until you make it”?

Hypocrisy, **Jesus** and Halloween

The word “hypocrisy” comes from the Greek word associated with a stage actor. A hypocrite, therefore, is someone pretending to be someone they are not.

The great 18th century English author and poet Samuel Johnson helps make an important distinction between hypocrisy and inevitable human shortcomings. It isn’t hypocrisy to fail to live up to one’s ideals. For example, if I teach personal finance or cooking or the importance of Jesus’ teachings, but I overdraft my bank account, burn the broccoli, or mess up on the “love your neighbor as yourself” bit, that is probably not hypocrisy. That is failure, sin and imperfection. It can be serious, but it is not hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy is *not* when you don’t succeed at what you teach or preach. It’s when you act as if you are better than you are, and ignore the discrepancy. Hypocrisy is judging others by the person you pretend to be.

The first time Jesus uses the word “hypocrite” in the Gospel of Matthew, it is in chapter 7, with the famous example of someone who pretends she can do surgery to remove the speck in someone else’s eye, while she has a whole log sticking out of her own eye.

I don’t think Jesus has anything against masks, costumes, pretend play or Halloween. What Jesus absolutely detests—and according to Matthew 23, he really lets loose on this topic—are spiritual masqueraders, those “got it all together” persons who like to hold

court over others. Jesus has nothing against 5-year-olds or 50-year-olds who wear princess or goblin costumes. What horrifies him are people in power who make rules and regulations they won’t bother to follow themselves.

Jesus hates this so much, he spends a whole chapter (Matthew 23) on the topic, using the word “hypocrite” over and over again in describing judgmental, two-faced behavior. It doesn’t take much reflection to realize he includes us administrators, teachers, parents, committee chairs and salaried staff in his diatribe. Speaking to people in positions of power inside and outside the church, Jesus describes our hypocrisies in vivid Halloween-themed pictures:

- You are like a dinner dish sparkling clean on the outside, crawling with filth on the inside.
- You are like white-washed tombs, pretty and flowery on the outside, stinking of rotting flesh and dead bones on the inside.
- You are like a whole nest of vipers, hiding your fangs and condemned to hell.

More than a dozen times in Matthew’s gospel, several times in chapter 23 alone, Jesus condemns those of us who like to be seen as someone we are not, who are quick to judge others by standards we do not practice ourselves.

And yet, in his usual upside-down way, Jesus’ stinging words of condemnation for hypocrisy show us God’s upside-down grace. God doesn’t judge us according to our slippery masks. God sees us as we are. And loves us into becoming more.

Masks **vs.** frumpiness

In high school, at the time I needed it least, when my face had few shadows and lines, when my skin was fresh, and my chin was firmly single, in high school I would not leave the house without full makeup, foundation, blemish concealer, liners, eyeshadow, mascara

lipstick, etc. Even with a full covering of makeup, I was acutely aware of each flaw.

I look back at the 15-year-old me and see how I was leaning into womanhood. I was experimenting with beauty and confidence. I felt I was far from actually being those things, but I knew I wanted to be strong and attractive and capable in my contributions.

My older sister gave me advice in these matters. When it was time to interview for my first professional job, she took me shopping and told me to “dress for the job you want.” When I was shy about speaking in front of a group of people, she said, “Prepare. Practice. Dress well. Then fake it until you make it.”

Now that I’m older and more established, I sometimes feel I err in the other direction. When I use the barest minimum of make-up these days, or fail to pluck my brows, is it a sign of being at peace with myself? Or is it a different kind of mask, an arrogance or indifference to what others think?

Once again that question. As a Christian, how vulnerable shall I be? What do I conceal, and when do I reveal?

In a December 2014 speech to church bureaucrats, Pope Francis gave a lively commentary on 15 “spiritual diseases.” Intended for the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy, it’s a terrific inventory for any organization. Number 12 on the list is the “disease of the funeral face.” This describes leaders who are “... scowling and unfriendly and think that, in order to be serious, they must show a melancholic and strict face.” Let’s be wary of trying to show a perfect face to the world, but let’s also be on alert against making the world a duller, uglier place than it needs to be.

I visit a variety of U.S. churches in my summer mission work, and sometimes I am astounded at the glum way a worship service starts. I want to say, “Put a smile on your face, Mr. Worship Leader. Time to get up from the dead, Ms. Pastor. If you are bored by these church announcements you’re making, Mr. Commit-

tee Chair, how do you think God feels about them?” I want to add, “You have the best news in the world to share, for God’s sake, cheer up.” Then I remember catching sight of my own self on video. It’s usually a disheartening experience. We’re all still practicing, leaning into becoming the beautiful, helpful, humorous servant-leaders Jesus redeemed us to be.

Masks and robes

What Halloween costume would you like to wear this year? Would you dare organize a Halloween party for your church group of “ladies of a certain age”?

Which mask might express part of your God-given personality, one of your Spirit-empowered roles? Will you take a chance to laugh at your witchy self? Is it time to show off your inner princess? Would you dress up as the villain God saves you from becoming, or the superhero God is still, audaciously, calling you to be?

God hates hypocrisy. Jesus warns against wearing masks of judgment. Instead, Jesus’ first followers talk about “putting on Christ” (Romans 13:14) and being “clothed with Christ” (Galatians 3:27). Maybe it’s time to switch out our spiritual masks for a new and better costume, the robe of Christ.

Is it better to be beautiful—or to be known? Putting on Christ means we can be both.

This Halloween, let’s grab on to the hope of becoming our real and best selves through God’s own unmasked face in Jesus. At Jesus’ Costume Party, we need never let go of our highest aspirations. We need never shy from confessing. We need never fear to experiment. God knows exactly who we are, untidy eyebrows and all. And God still proclaims us utterly beautiful. 🌸

The Rev. Christa von Zychlin lives in Hong Kong, China, where she teaches adults and children through ELCA Global Mission and the ELCHK (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong). Read more about Christa’s adventures in Hong Kong at www.marathonangel.blogspot.com.



LET US PRAY

Nurturing as prayer

by Julie K. Ageson

How do we think about

who and what God is, and what the spirit of God is like? Which words and images do we use to describe a God beyond language and pictures? In this 21st century, we moderns like to think we've come a long way as interpreters of wisdom. Sometimes we're even a bit puffed up about life-changing advancements in medicine, science and technology. But in the realm of spiritual life, I want to go back a few centuries.

Mechtild of Magdeburg was a 13th century mystic. She lived in medieval times and yet she understood God as a nurturing mother. Like many other saints and mystics, she was bold about exploring new ways for understanding God. Her image of God as a nurturing mother is yet another description of prayer.

I have three daughters. At each of their births, the sense of awe and unabashed wonder about their "being" was completely overwhelming. God as creator giving me the gift of creation is a powerful experience of generativity. Those searing moments of pushing a living child out of my body are etched forever in my psyche. They are perhaps the closest I will come to knowing the presence and mystery of God who creates and makes of us creators.

I now watch each of my daughters care for their children with the same devotion and nurturing presence that was lavished on them. The image of God as nurturing mother fills me with an overpowering sense of gratitude. In my longing to find words and images for

a God who creates life, who takes our form, who nurtures us, there is deep joy and affirmation in imagining God as mother. "Mothering God, you gave me birth . . . mothering Christ, you took my form . . . mothering spirit, nurturing one." *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 73

The image of God birthing the world—the universe—as a nurturing mother is apt. It helps us understand God as the source of all life. It shows us the wonder of creation and of creating. This nurturing aspect of "God-ness" helps us know ourselves to be made in God's image. It profoundly enriches our sense of who we are and affirms the sacredness of our lives. It's a way of communing with God—a way of praying and yet another lens for "seeing" God in our midst.

How is the mystery and greatness of God conveyed in metaphors that nourish and sustain us? And how do we describe the Creator with words and images that include and embrace all people knowing that our language for God always will be limited, inadequate, and partial?

The prophet Isaiah's description is a strikingly graphic echo:

"...you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom . . . you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you" (Isaiah 66:11, 12b, 13a). 🌸

Julie K. Ageson is co-author of *One Hope: Remembering the Body of Christ* (Liturgical Press/Augsburg Fortress) which honors the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.



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Let the light in

by Cara Strickland

I was the only one in the lobby, sitting in a padded chair, staring at the patterned carpet. Soon the therapist would come out and find me, and we would embark upon my first counseling appointment. I was terrified.

I wasn't afraid because I thought anything would truly happen to me. I was sure that she had a comfortable couch, and that she would do her best to be kind. I was afraid of what this appointment would come to mean. There were things in my mind that scared me, and I was hoping against hope that they wouldn't scare my therapist as well. I was desperate to hear that I wasn't broken irreparably and beyond hope.

There has always been something particularly grave to me about the words "mental illness." They sound like a pronouncement or a value judgment. If I admit that I have mental illness, I'm not just having a bad day or a rough week, I'm sick. I'm not all right the way I am. As I waited for my appointment to start, I wondered how this might change my perception of myself. I worried about what would happen if I didn't go through with it.

Triggered by loneliness

My depression started in college with a lonely study abroad trip. I would later learn that this is called situation depression, triggered by some kind of traumatic event.

The feelings of hopelessness and suicidal thoughts surprised me because they were so different from my usual mental reality. Since they abated where I was safely back in my own country, I allowed myself to place that chapter of my life far in the back of my mental closet, hoping that it wouldn't resurface.

It was several years before I had to face that time again. This time the suicidal thoughts were worse, triggered by an unhealthy job environment. I was afraid not only because of the actions I might take, but also because I was seeing a pattern. The fear was enough to get me to quit my job and start counseling.

For as long as I can remember, my thoughts on counseling have been negative. In Christian culture (and to some extent, outside it), I picked up the message that people who needed counseling were sick or broken. They weren't the ones continuing to function, holding down jobs, raising families and maintaining relationships. They were the other: people to be pitied.

It pains me that the stigma of counseling (and indeed mental illness) is so pervasive, not only in our individual minds, but in our churches. I picked up this message that I needed to keep it together, that good girls don't get depression or any other mental illness.

All of my own biases against mental illness made me hesitant to share my experiences with others. I was afraid that people would think that I was crazy, that I



would lose friends. Slowly I began floating the t-word (therapist) and d-word (depression) into conversation, letting it hang in the air nervously like a question. I couldn't have been more surprised by what I discovered.

Not alone

As I shared my painful, dark places, I began to notice that my conversation partners relaxed a little and started sharing their own stories. Instead of judgment and fear, I found nods of understanding and countless "me, too" moments. The people that I'd thought were unshakable and together were actually hurting and struggling just like I was.

I was not alone in my feelings or my experience. By holding it together, I was cutting myself off from the life-giving power of community and empathy.

As I began to be more courageous in talking about my experiences with depression, being honest about the fact that these episodes were not in the past, and reaching out for help when I was in the midst of one, I realized that I wanted to write about it.

In my writing, I'd referenced "difficult times" so often, failing to see the patterns or choosing not to acknowledge them. I wanted to be honest, not just because I knew it would be healing for me to see the words in black and white, but because I thought there might be people in my audience who needed to feel less alone.

I wrote the piece and published it on my website. I was unprepared for the flood of comments and emails I received from people who felt just the way I did. Perhaps more strikingly, I was surprised by the people from my everyday life who started opening up about their own current and past struggles. My community grew even larger. Instead of feeling pathetic and weak, I began to see myself the way these people were seeing me, and the way I was seeing them: brave.

After the initial euphoria, it became clear that not everyone would understand my struggle (or even want

to). Sometimes when I floated a vulnerable sentence, I was met with a blank stare or even shock. However, speaking the words out loud into compassionate ears had done its work. I no longer wanted to hide after those conversations. I no longer measured my worth by whether or not I appeared all right to the person in front of me.

Held by God

The gift of those vulnerable moments, and others that have come since, is that they have taught me not to run from hard places in myself or in others. I have faced the fear that because I am sometimes depressed I am somehow unsafe. In the process, I have faced the fear that because others struggle with mental illness, they are dangerous, or that it is catching. I have learned that these things are not true.

There is a temptation for me to avoid people who are in pain. I don't think that I am alone in this. All of my words seem meaningless in the face of true difficulty. It is easy to celebrate with those who are experiencing good things, our traditional view of blessing. It is harder to sit with those who are waiting for deliverance. When I was diagnosed with depression, I could no longer avoid sitting with someone in pain. That person was myself.

I learned from intimate experience that depression didn't change the fact that I was loved and held by God. I sat with myself and I was still me. I moved past my fear to love myself, depression and all.

It breaks my heart to think of the pain I must have caused in the past, listening with judgment and discomfort, rather than with patience and love when people in my life shared their struggles with the untamable wildness of their minds. When conversations got too uncomfortable, I found an excuse to exit them. I avoided them because I didn't know what to say. I kept my distance from friends and strangers who showed me that I wasn't invincible.

Slowly, my greatest fear caught me, as perhaps much fears always do. I stared it down sitting in that chair, waiting for my first counseling session. I kept looking it in the face week after week until I was able to see a friend, rather than an enemy, in myself. My depression became a teacher and a means of grace.

After my relationship with the first therapist didn't work out, I found another one. I took a deep breath and poured out the worst of what was in my mind and heart on her lime green couch. I knew that she was paid to listen and help, but I loved the way she didn't flinch when I was completely honest.

There was no flicker to betray worry or doubt.

For the first time in my life, I was seen for all

that I was, not pushing the sketchy bits to

the back or trying to make my words

and feelings palatable. It was as if a

giant weight had been lifted.

I spent so much time fleeing

the demons I sensed in the shad-

ows, double-checking the locks

when the terror was already inside.

My therapist helped me to open my doors, unfastening

each deadbolt with nervous hands.

I had shut out God, family and friends, even myself.

I was isolated, hoping that the fear and the depression

would go away. But it only grew.

Most have a story

I know I'm not the only one who does this. I've learned

that most people have a story from the mental illness

spectrum (whether or not they admit it). Some hide,

and some embrace the struggle. Most do a little of both.

They are our friends and neighbors, the same people

we pass the peace to each Sunday, those who drink

of the same cup during the Eucharist. They are pastors

and laypeople, young and old. They are you and me.

I don't want to run from mental illness (or any illness)

anymore. Instead I want to follow Jesus' example. He

consistently went to the dark places, places that made other people squirm. He spent time with the people who made other people uncomfortable, the people who have made me uncomfortable.

Not only did Jesus sit with those people, but he touched them, he ate with them and he healed them. He was not afraid of their pain or their outcast status. He was not afraid of what they'd done or what they thought in the secret places of their hearts. He saw it all, knew it all and always stretched out a hand. In this way, I think that my therapist is teaching me a little more about who Jesus is.

There is a lot of talk in the gospels about the demons that Jesus cast out. It's easy

for me to think that demons don't

fit into our modern-day lives. But

what is depression if not a demon?

Whether or not we're talking

about spiritual beings or disorders,

it's clear that something

was not well with the people

in the gospels. They were not at

home in their own minds. It is likely that they were

afraid. Sometimes I wish that Jesus would command

the depression out of me. Even as I wish for healing, I

can't help but be thankful for the journey depression

has led me on. Instead of an instantaneous healing, I

am experiencing transformation. I am watching God

use even something that feels evil and dark to teach me

about beauty, love and humanity.

Healing takes all forms. For some, it looks like

medication, prescribed by a doctor. For others, it's

therapy of one sort or another. Each story is different,

each person is unique. Sometimes the darkness seems

to win, even in my life. On those days I sit still, waiting

for the light. 🌿

Cara Strickland writes about food, faith and life from her home in

the Pacific Northwest. She writes at www.carastrickland.com, and

is currently at work on a spiritual memoir about food.

*healing
takes all
forms.*



FAMILY MATTERS

Me, myself and God

by Sue Gamelin

“Um, Tim, could you help me?” I hesitantly called out to my husband. He heard that plea a lot at the beginning of this year. “Do you have time to help me put on my jacket... hang up my bath towel... spread peanut butter on my English muffin?” Surgery on my right hand had left me not only hurting, but temporarily disabled. Put on jeans just out of the dryer and at their snuggest? No way. Tie my walking shoes? Forget it. Drive my car? Not yet.

It was hard for me to ask for help. I seem to be stuck in the 3-year-old stage of life known as the “I’ll do it myself” phase. Really stuck. My mom used to remind me that when I was a toddler I would lull myself to sleep in the rocking chair in my room. “Myself,” I would say when she would want to hold and rock me. When dad would try to teach me to swim or ride a bike? “I’ll do it myself,” was my refrain, even when I didn’t have a clue about how I could. Driving me from home to go to college? “I’m okay. Thank you. Goodbye.” Drive my three young children across country while my husband was abroad? “No, I don’t need any help.”

It was hard for me to ask my sweet, always willing husband for help when I was recovering from carpometacarpal joint arthroscopy. But I had to. And he loved being there to help. Tim wrote to our daughters, “I have had the pleasure of being useful during mom’s recovery from surgery. What began as opening jars and turning doorknobs for her expanded into doing a variety of simple tasks... like preparing food, folding clothes and writ-

ing things. I was especially pleased that Suz learned to ask for my help when she needed it.” A new concept for me, for sure, asking for help.

A certain amount of self-reliance is a blessing. Too much is a curse. In counseling I learned some of the reasons why I was so focused on doing things myself. Does learning about the reasons for troubling behavior lead to altering it? Not in my case.

How can an excess of self-reliance be a curse and not a blessing? Isn’t “I’ll do it myself” something to be proud of? There are many reasons why the “myself” model can be counter-productive—including the possibility that others might be able to do something better than I can. Fancy that! Furthermore, a complex project may need two or three people’s gifts working together to complete it. It is also true that not asking for help for a demanding task can leave me exhausted and short-tempered. Could it be that “I’ll do it myself” is my effort to control everything in my life? Impossible.

A few years ago I confidently led a multi-session Bible study focusing on 1 Corinthians 12. Here Paul speaks with first century Christians about the work of the Holy Spirit among them. In the heart of this conversation lies wisdom for all who follow Jesus in the 21st century: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (verse 7). Aha! Each of us has been given a unique set of spiritual gifts but not all the gifts we need. We need to rely not only on our gifts, but also on

each other's gifts for a complete life. We're not all athletes and organizers. We need those people who are. And we may be the engineers and artists that they need. I taught this compellingly to a roomful of people. Did I learn it myself? Um...

Henri Nouwen enters the conversation in his book, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroads, 1989). Brother Nouwen speaks of living among mentally challenged adults in the L'Arche community near Toronto, where his job included feeding, clothing and bathing people who couldn't do these things without help. He found that he had to let go of...the self that can do things, show things, prove things and build things—and...reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments." Later he contrasts that profound realization with the voice of the secular world around us which announces: "We can take care of ourselves. We do not need God, the Church...we are in control. And if we are not, then we have to work harder to get in control. The problem is not lack of faith, but lack of competence." We can do it ourselves.

Trying to do everything without help is an arrogant goal. Relying upon the gifts of others is what it means to be part of a family, part of

the human family. From the bliss of warm milk delivered with love when we've just arrived in the world, to help with spreading peanut butter on our toast when arthritis disables; from diapering when we're born, to diapering when we're old, we need each other. Equally vital are the wisdom and witness we receive from each other as we grow. Giving and receiving these gifts is part of being open to receiving and giving love. Tim's patience with me, his warm infectious laughter when I do something silly, his love of me even when I'm in distress, might be even greater blessings than opening jars and turning doorknobs. When I'm frustrated with the events of the day, I go to Tim and ask him to remind me that the Kingdom of God will come—even if I can't make it do so.


Are you like me? Are we really arrogant enough to think that we can "do it ourselves," even without God? Martin Luther proclaims from his 16th century pulpit to our 21st century lives that we can't even believe in Jesus by ourselves. We certainly can't be the church on our own.

In Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*, he calls us to confess: "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he



calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 1162).

At the homeless shelter that I frequent, a resident plugged his cheap cellphone into the wall. A song flooded the room. My first thought was the one I raise in the church van when teenager music sneaks out of headphones: "Is this a song that Jesus would like?" My shelter friend's music satisfied the criterion. It was a Gospel song-prayer that began, "I Need You Now."

Holy God, we need your help. We can't do it all by ourselves.  **The Rev. Sue Gamelin** is a retired ELCA pastor, who washes the feet of homeless folks and low income children and youth in North Carolina. She and her husband, Tim, have four grown children and their spouses and 11 grandchildren.



Slow down for justice

by Judith Roberts

Judith Roberts and her son
Julian pose at the Willis
Tower in Chicago, Ill.

Sometimes we need to practice slow faith. But is that still the case when it's a justice issue? Today, when we deal with racism in the U.S., mass incarceration, injustice in policing—and globally, the cries of Palestinians and others, do we really see those most affected? Our baptismal covenant calls us to do justice.

Imago Dei

I spend a great deal of time traveling by planes, trains and automobiles. No matter where I travel, at some point a child will catch my attention, make eye contact and smile. Children effortlessly make this natural connection, using the most basic and universal form of human expression. Experts say children smile up to 400 times a day. Regardless of their race, ethnic or cultural background, children see me as they too want to be seen. Even in a brief nonverbal encounter, we can see the face of God (Imago Dei) in each other.

As the mother of a 21-year-old, I recall my child, Julian, at that age—a happy, playful little boy with an infectious smile. I remember his openness and willingness to see and connect to total strangers—no matter what the setting.

I also see the challenges he encounters in the world as a young, black male between the ages of 18 to 35. As a black mother, it hurts my heart to see him pained by the stereotypes placed on black males in society.

I recently had a conversation with another black male regarding the current racial climate in America. Myles is a young, soft-spoken African American man. Like my son, he faces the everyday experiences of being young and black in the United States. He can name the times he's been stopped and questioned by law enforcement officers for simply walking or driving in his middle-class neighborhood.

Now 24 years of age, Myles has lived in the same community since first grade. He says his mom also fears for his safety, "Every day before I leave for work,

my mom reminds me to be careful, especially after Trayvon Martin was shot and killed. You just never know if you will be next."

"It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see."

— Henry David Thoreau

According to Harvard psychologists, Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons, "We think we see ourselves and the world as they really are, but we're actually missing a whole lot." The two psychologists tested this theory in an experiment known as the "awareness test." The visual experiment involves two teams preparing for a game of basketball. Viewers were given instructions to count the number of ball passes that the team wearing all white would make during the game. The majority of viewers counted the accurate number of ball passes but failed to notice the moonwalking bear gliding through the middle of the scene. For many, the bear isn't detected until the scene is replayed in slow motion. The moonwalking bear is analogous to how we tend to see racism in our society. We can miss what we're *not* looking for. Racism dehumanizes people of color—it is the normalization of devaluing others by not seeing their intrinsic worth. This distortion of reality is not limited to a visual distortion in terms of physical sight. Racism and other forms of oppression also affect our thoughts, our knowledge and ability to reason.

If we see racism through a narrow view, we miss what's happening in the bigger picture. The summer of 2014 was filled with racial tension all across the United States. Young people of all races protested the shooting death of Mike Brown, an unarmed black teenager in Ferguson, Mo., by a white police officer. In the months following the non-indictment by a grand jury of the white officer, Pew Research Center conducted a poll on race relations in the United States. Polling consistently showed that blacks and whites have different views about race relations and racial equity. The

survey reported that only 32 percent of blacks believed the country had progressed toward racial equality as compared to 48 percent of whites.

This past spring, the city of Baltimore erupted after 25-year-old Freddie Gray, a black man, died from major spinal injuries while in the custody of law enforcement. Following Gray's funeral, demonstrators took to the streets in protest. Several major news outlets captured the explosive actions involving looting and the vandalism of property.

The late Martin Luther King Jr. said, "A riot is the language of the unheard." Rather than seeing human beings outwardly expressing their anger and frustration, the public seemed to see them as a group, dehumanizing them as without intrinsic worth.

We learn about the world from early encounters with parents, family members, caring adults, teachers and peers. Early on we are taught to see race (or not). We receive messages of racial superiority of white skin and racial inferiority of people of color who are non-white. These messages are internalized within our own thoughts and minds—and are reinforced by institutions such as schools and churches as well as by the media and cultural norms.

We bring these private beliefs about ourselves and others into interpersonal space with others. From generation to generation, we rinse and repeat the cycle of racial socialization—unless the messages are interrupted.

Jesus at the temple

My first book of children's Bible stories was a Christmas gift from my maternal grandmother, Emogene. To this day I still remember the story and illustration of Jesus driving the buyers and sellers out of the temple (Matthew 21:12–17). In the story, after Jesus uses intentional force to drive out the money-changers, he heals the sick. This story, recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, is the only time Jesus resorts to using violence. It had become common practice for the money-changers to

conduct business within the institution. They did not see the suffering of the people. Jesus clearly saw the abuse of power by those with resources and status and the denial of access and opportunity for the people outside of the temple. The temple was built for *all* people but only the merchants and money-changers benefited from its use.

When institutions in our society repeatedly deny access and opportunities to people and communities on the margins, it keeps oppression in place. In major cities all across the United States, large pockets of black and brown low-income communities have been left behind due to residential segregation and concentrated poverty. According to 2014–2015 school enrollments, 84 percent of 84,976 children in Baltimore Public City Schools are eligible for free or reduced price meals. When barriers exist for families and individuals to access good paying jobs, affordable and healthy foods, well-funded schools and decent housing, the outcomes of success and the quality of life are drastically lowered for people in that community.

Living a daring faith

Lutherans believe faith is a living, daring confidence in God's abundant grace. This understanding of faith calls us to a deeper relationship with the power of the Holy Spirit. It calls us to listen to God's Holy Word. This faith stirs us to move beyond ourselves, our congregations and our communities—and join with others out in the world.

In addition to our faith, we put our trust in people, companies, political parties, institutions and systems. We believe that decisions made by leaders of organizations, policies of corporations and political actions will indubitably bend toward just treatment and equal opportunities for all across society. However, when unfair treatment and disadvantages persist in harming people and communities (based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, ability, sexual orientation and other forms of oppression)

while simultaneously advantaging those with privilege as a group, we must *slow down* to see the brokenness of injustice that exists within institutions across society and globally. We must *slow down* to see the image of God (Imago Dei) in each other—that each one is fully deserving of all dignity and respect. Together through our baptismal covenant, we must act to strive toward justice.

Message to my son

As I watch my beautiful boy mature into an amazing man, I cannot shield him from the realities and ugliness of racism in its overt and covert forms of discrimination. However, I can remind him of the faithfulness of a living God who dwells inside of him. I can encourage him to defy racist stereotypes that are placed upon young, black males. I can remind him of his ancestors who have come this far by faith. I can tell the history of the interracial group of Freedom Riders that traveled the highways sacrificing life and limb in hopes of creating a beloved community.

When it feels like he's carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, I will continue to let him know I've got his back. I will remind him that he is not alone and encourage him to join with others striving for justice in the world. When there is nothing more I can do or say to make the hurt go away, I will *slow down* from my busyness and make time to just listen.

Pentecost

The season of Pentecost is a time to remember the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that both forms the church and calls the church into mission and ministry in the world. Guided by the power of the Holy Spirit, may we take the time to stop, look, listen and respond to the holy yearnings of all of God's people.

Let us *slow down* to pay attention, to look closely and listen carefully for the urging of the Holy Spirit to follow the Light into the world by putting our faith into action. 🌿

Judith Roberts attends Bethel Lutheran Church, Chicago, and serves as ELCA program director for racial justice ministries.



▼ TOGETHER MAY WE

Stop to see the dignity and value in each person we encounter. Slow down to notice when messages of racial superiority or inferiority are playing in our heads. Check assumptions about an individual and/or community. Refrain from rushing to judgment and relying on stereotypes.

Look for inequities within your own community that perpetuate unequal treatment through policies, practices and attitudes toward low-income and/or communities of color (i.e., criminal justice, educational system, health-care system and housing).

Listen to and learn from people and communities of color about their experiences, history and aspirations.

Speak up and out about racial injustices.

Share with others ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton's March 25, 2015, message, "Call for Conversations on Racial Equity," available on the ELCA website at www.elca.org/News-and-Events/7732.

Join with others in your congregation and community to connect faith with public life. Visit the ELCA Advocacy webpage www.elca.org/advocacy and sign up for action alerts.

Offer to host a community forum at your congregation on enhancing relationships with law enforcement. Study the ELCA social statement, "The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries" (downloadable online at www.elca.org)

Pray for and promote the dignity and humanity of all people.

IN MAKING OTHERS INVISIBLE, WE MISS SEEING JESUS

Pass me not

by Violet Cucciniello Little

Draped in a cotton-candy-pink prayer shawl knit especially for her, Robin embodied the love and grace of the God in whose name she had just been baptized.

The women and men surrounding and blessing Robin at her baptism were from The Welcome Church, an ELCA congregation without walls, mostly made up of people experiencing homelessness. Robin now “has her keys” (the word on the street when one gets housing), but her life has not been easy.

Born on Friday, the 13th child in a family that clung to superstitions, Robin was told she was cursed and

from the seed of the devil. Because Robin so strongly resembled her handsome but much-resented father, Robin’s mother often transferred that resentment to her beautiful baby girl. When Robin was an infant, her mother tried to smother her. The abuse continued until Robin was well into her teens. Today, Robin still bears scars on her legs from scalding water and one eye injured to the point of blindness when she was only 7 years old.



After a gang-rape when she was 17, Robin was told not to press charges against her attackers because she “deserved it.” She began to drink to ease the pain. With the drinking, there were drugs; and to pay for the drugs, there was prostitution.

When I first met Robin, she was living on the street. She came to The Welcome Center, a drop-in center I founded that later gave birth to The Welcome Church. I started the center after I saw a woman in a train sta-

tion restroom washing up and using the broken-down hand blowers to dry her hair. Though I’d seen many other women do the same in that restroom through the years, something about seeing *that* woman on *that* day changed the course of my life.

Eyes wide open

God opened my eyes at the train station. It makes me think of how, after being forced out of Abraham’s house-

hold with her young son, Ishmael, Hagar prayed that God might provide them with water in the wilderness that her son might live. God “opened her eyes” and Hagar *saw* a well of water—one that had been there all along.

That day at the train station I saw pain but I also saw possibility. What if churches donated space so women might have a place to rest and have a cup of tea? Over that shared cup of tea, I met Robin and so many others who bless my life.

It’s easy to lose sight of God’s people in our midst. It’s easy to develop tunnel vision so narrowly focused that we only see those who look like us, talk like us or fit into whatever norms we’ve created of what is acceptable in *our* sight, rather than what is acceptable in God’s sight. It is as if we spread an invisibility cloak over others without even knowing it.

In an experiment done by the New York City Rescue Mission, women and men volunteered to dress as if they were homeless and living on the street. Though many people who are homeless are often clean and *not* panhandling on the sidewalk, these volunteers were stationed on the street, looking as though they had been out there for days. Arrangements were made so that family members and close friends would have some reason to walk past these folks. The result: Most walked by without even recognizing their sister, uncle, cousin or even, in the case of one man, his wife.

What is it that makes our vision so selective?

Seeing does matter

Sometimes I think we are afraid. But mostly, I think we feel overwhelmed and helpless. It’s similar to the old story of the starfish, in which thousands of starfish wash ashore, in danger of dying in the hot sun. In that story, a young boy sees an old man gently tossing the starfish back into the ocean. The boy asks, “Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean? With so many miles of beach and thousands of fish, what difference will it make?” And the old man replies, “It will make a

difference to the ones I have tossed back.” Sometimes we think “not seeing” is the right thing to do, as when people say, “I don’t see color,” with the intention of expressing an inclusive attitude. In reality, however, not seeing any part of a person adds to making that person less visible and creates deep hurt.

Several years ago, in a section of Philadelphia called Grey’s Ferry, a number of events led to racial tension. Marchers staged a peaceful protest in a predominantly white section of the neighborhood. As I watched the televised news, what struck me was that when the marchers quietly walked by, folks came out of their houses and visibly turned away. The pain caused by this simple act of “not seeing” was palpable.

Jimmy showed up during one of our earliest Welcome Church gatherings. He was thin and his clothes were worn. We offered Jimmy lunch, but instead he asked if a piano was available. We directed him to a piano in the room and Jimmy began to play a song that became *his* plea. His voice exuding strength beyond his wasted body, Jimmy sang words that Fanny Crosby wrote well over a century ago:

*“Pass me not, O gentle Savior
Hear my humble cry...
While on others Thou art calling
Do not pass me by.”*

The chatter in the room came to a hush. Then sounds emerged from others who had so often been passed by. Our chorus of prayer accompanied Jimmy:

*“...Savior, Savior, hear my humble cry...
While on others thou art calling, do not pass me by...”*

We miss seeing Jesus

Jesus tells us that there are consequences for not opening our eyes, especially to those described in Matthew as “the least of these”—the women and men who are

most vulnerable in our society. In Luke 16, we hear Jesus' story of the rich man at whose palatial gate Lazarus stood begging and living on the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. It wasn't until the rich man had died that he realized his need for Lazarus. Perhaps the greatest consequence of making others invisible is that we miss seeing Jesus along the way.

Gladys was easy to miss. She always dressed in dark colors as if to hide from those she believed were about to harm her. There were very few resources in the city Gladys trusted, but she came to The Welcome Church gatherings. She said it was because she liked the way I said her name at communion.

Shortly before Christmas, Gladys said she had a gift she wanted to give me privately. She was afraid others might not understand. We moved to a different space and Gladys handed me a large shopping bag stuffed with a big fluffy blanket. Touching the blanket, I could tell it was damp. "I'm sorry it's still wet," Gladys said. "I washed it for you before I came."

God gives us all

Gladys had given me the blanket she slept with on the street, along with a card showing a manger scene. I now had a new understanding of God who gives us all God has. God wraps us all in God's own loving blanket. Through Gladys, I met Jesus face to face.

When The Welcome Church became involved in a struggle with the city to lift a ban on the outdoor public sharing of food, people called us as a "voice for the voiceless." But in reality everyone has a voice. Our challenge is to find ways that we can *become better listeners*, so that all voices may be heard—and *open our eyes*, so that no one becomes invisible.

The first time I wore contact lenses, I walked my children to school. I was amazed at how beautiful the streets looked. It was as though I was walking through my neighborhood for the first time, even though I had lived there for years.

God's grace corrects the vision of our hearts. God's grace is the only way we will see the diversity of the world in all its beauty. It is the only way we can acknowledge all parts of God's body and stand with those who are vulnerable or in pain. It is the only way to move toward healing our broken world.

Who's at the table?

As women, we are called to respond to this incredible gift of grace. We must open our eyes and see who is at the table and who is missing. We must also be willing to leave room at the table to receive everyone's gifts, trusting that the gifts are there to be received.


One time I forgot to bring the snacks I had packed for our Tuesday Bible study. I set out some tea and crackers I had in my backpack, feeling badly about all the space left on the table. What happened next taught me an important lesson. Folks from the Bible study began to take things out of *their* bags to share with the whole group. Soon we had a banquet.

Be open to what God can do in your setting. For example, during our Maundy Thursday foot washing, local podiatrists offered care to people on the street. Sharing tea and cookies helped our congregation to grow. Not having a church building connected us even more closely to those without houses.

God will use whatever you have, as well as what you don't have. Be open to the endless possibilities of God's creative Spirit.

Before handing Robin her baptismal candle, her sponsor Joetta shared this verse of Scripture: "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." Robin's light was indeed shining. All we had to do was to see this daughter of God in all her beauty. 🌸

The Rev. Violet Cucciniello Little, child of God, serves as pastor and mission developer of The Welcome Church in Philadelphia. She is also a psychotherapist and trainer for Women of the ELCA's Racial Justice Ministries.



MAKE HASTE, O LORD

Theme verse

"My times are in your hand. Deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors." Psalm 31:15

Opening hymn

Precious Lord, Take my Hand, *ELW 773*

Overview

"We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right."

—Martin Luther King Jr.,
Letter from a Birmingham Jail

Last month we observed God's call to us to slow down. We examined the gift of the Sabbath, a built-in break from a culture dominated by increasing speed. We compared the Sabbath teachings in Exodus and Deuteronomy to learn why Sabbath rest is important.

But what about slowing down too much? Can we go overboard in that direction? When is God telling us to hurry up and take action? When might we wish God would speed up a little?

This session will glean the rich testimony found in the psalms to explore the limits of "slow faith." Countless prayers arise from the psalmist's voice asking God some version of the question, "How long?" How long will we suffer? How long will you be silent? How long until we experience grace? Ancient cries in the psalms echo forth to the present day. How long will the nations quarrel, ignoring the suffering of their people? How long will my child be sick? How long must I wait for work?

In addition to finding an ancient prayer companion in the psalmist, we also discover a source of hope and encouragement. Nearly every psalm that cries out to God in frustration or pain also ends with some kind of affirmation: "Yet, O God, I will trust in you." What can we learn from that faithful refrain? How is trust formed in the context of longing or suffering?

Martin Luther King Jr., quoted above, is responding to fellow clergy who called his protest actions in Alabama "unwise and untimely." As much as God directs us into healthy rhythms and Sabbath slowness, oppressive voices that resist change can also sound out caution.

against speed, using words like “untimely” to describe prophetic efforts like those of the Civil Rights movement. King simply replies, “The time is always ripe to do right.” When it comes to right action, faithful action, time is an ever-ripening fruit. Perhaps we can take the image further: like ripened fruit a right action declined becomes rotten. (See “Slow down for justice,” p. 18.)

Through Jesus, God is reconciling the whole world. And yet as we share in that ministry of reconciliation, we may continue to suffer. Indeed, as King did, we may suffer more for doing the work of the kingdom. The psalms, the prayerbook of God’s people, can be a fruitful ground for finding a voice in that experience.

READ PSALM 13 ALOUD.

Take three deep breaths. Notice how many times the psalmist cries, “How long?” What else does she ask of God? What are her fears? How does the prayer end?

Repetition is significant in Hebrew poetry. Here, the psalmist repeats her prayer four times: “How long, O LORD?” Each stanza magnifies the cry of the one before. This four-fold chant/prayer adds emotional force to the whole passage. We get a sense the psalmist is truly in pain, hands in the air, almost unable to stop pleading.

Let us look more deeply at each petition; you may remain in one group for discussion or break into four small groups, one for each prayer.

What does this psalm say about the Hebrew perception of God? How is it unlike ours? How is it like ours?

How long...will you forget me forever?

You are in a coffee shop waiting for a friend to arrive. You planned to meet at 9 a.m. It’s 10 after. 9:15. No texts or calls from her. Half past. You begin to wonder, “Did she just forget?”

In C.S. Lewis’s classic novel, *The Lion, The Witch,*

and the Wardrobe, little Lucy Pevensie travels through a magical wardrobe and finds a world of eternal winter. It is Narnia, a beautiful but cursed land. Soon Lucy learns from Tumnus, a talking Fawn, that “it’s always winter here, but never Christmas.” The land and all its creatures are held in the evil sway of the White Witch. The one anticipated festival of winter is forever delayed, a sign of the Witch’s cruelty. Has hope disappeared forever?

Experiencing an unexpected, unplanned wait can become frozen time. God’s people waited for God to act on many occasions. Unlike the casual instance of forgetting a coffee date, God’s people waited for help, freedom and an end to their suffering. Over and over they asked God, “Did you just forget about us?” Again and again, God replied, “No, I did not forget. I love you, and I will act.”

When have you felt forgotten? How do you make amends with someone else after you forgot or neglected their needs or concerns?

From the psalms to our own prayers in worship, we ask God to “remember.” Do you picture God needing this reminder? Why do we pray this way?

At the end of Sunday worship, we often dismiss each other by saying “remember the poor.” In this instance, what does remembering mean?

How long...will you hide your face from me?

“The Lord’s face shine on you and be gracious to you.” Many Sundays, we hear the blessing of Aaron from the book of Numbers speaking to us of God’s shining, caring face. Even though “no one has ever seen God” (John 1), the idea of God’s face bestowing blessings and provisions is a consistent theme in the Bible. When God’s face is turned toward the earth or toward a group of people, they benefit. Conversely, when God hides God’s face, creation suffers.

Psalm 104, “Bless the LORD, O my soul,” is an

extended hymn to God the Creator and includes a section about the ultimate dependency of all things on God for life and health (v. 27–30):

These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.

When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.

Being caught in the gaze of the Holy One means life, and being left outside the gaze means death. The authors of Psalms 13 and 104 know this. One of them is giving thanks; the other is pleading for help. It may be a cliché to talk about lovers' eyes meeting "across a crowded room" and instantly falling for each other. But think about times when we don't meet the gaze of our loved ones. We know something is wrong when there's no eye contact in our conversations. Being able to physically look each other in the eye means there is still life and health between us, even when we may not "see eye to eye" on things. When we turn away, when we hide our eyes from each other, some deeper problem lurks. For the relationship, the difference could be life or death. (See "Pass me not," p. 22.)

Or think of parents and children. A mom or dad might say, "I need your eyes" as she or he addresses a behavior problem. That shared gaze means the relationship is important. Our eyes can affirm a parental "I love you" while our words set boundaries. Perhaps the author of Psalm 13 is saying, "I need your eyes."

Can you think of a time when you felt invisible? Since we can't simply program some "Face Time" with the Creator, how do you seek intimate connection with God? Where do you notice God's face?

How long...must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

Present day rates of depression are alarming. Most of us, at some time, will experience mental or emotional turmoil so great it may destabilize us internally. When this happens in a chronic manner, we speak of "mental illness." There are others who suffer pain in their bodies for a lifetime without a solution. Chronic fatigue and chronic pain affect more and more people, but little can be done about it. Lastly, all of us lose loved ones and grieve their absence. Sorrow, pain and loss come with living in this world. (See "Let the light in," p. 12.)

Sadly, some feel that they cannot bring this experience of suffering to church. Some feel pressured to bear up under the weight of sorrow or cover over their sadness. Some of us have even been taught that naming our grievances before God is a form of pride, as though God couldn't be bothered with our problems.

Have any of you felt this way? (See "Masks," p. 6.)

Psalm 13 (above) stands as testimony against such censorship. God hears all our prayers, and God's people gather to lift up such deep prayers of the heart together. This psalmist would not be singing alone. Rather, all her sisters and brothers in faith would accompany her and cry out to God with one voice: "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"

Is there a hymn or song that helps you lift your sufferings to God?

Is there a part of the liturgy or a particular moment in worship

when you know your deepest pains can be spoken or held in love?

How long...shall my enemy be exalted over me?

After three petitions that pertain mostly to the life of the psalmist alone, this prayer turns outward, addressing her relationships with others. She is in conflict with a neighbor, or many neighbors, so much that she uses the term "enemy." This petition corresponds with verse 4 of the psalm, "My enemy will say, 'I have prevailed.'"

My foes will rejoice because I am shaken.”

Some of us would be hard-pressed to name a particular enemy. Others of us have lived with continual opposition or worked in a conflict-ridden environment. Most of us can name some kind of struggle we have experienced and whether we came out victorious or not. In the psalms, God is frequently called upon to “deliver” the author or the whole nation. To deliver means to save from enemies, to rescue from real threat. Here in Psalm 13, the specific concern is the shame that comes from being held down. The prayer is not so much about the conflict itself but the fact that our enemy is exalted over us. “God, how could you let *her/him/them/it* win over me?”

Before we jump to the words of Jesus (love your enemies) to soften or edit this petition, let’s try to listen to the psalmist’s concern. We may wish to argue that simply praying for our enemies to lose is not all that Christ-like. But what if the psalmist’s plea comes from decades of shame and humiliation? Does that change how this prayer sounds? As with the petition about suffering, we sometimes censor our prayers out of a fear that we may seem unfaithful or un-Christ-like to speak them. And again, like the prayer about bearing pain, this psalm testifies to a God that hears all our prayers, even prayers spoken in anger or fear.

Have you ever prayed to God about your enemies? What did you pray? Have you felt hesitant to talk to God about conflict or struggle, as though it was wrong to bring that concern before God? Can praying through our fears and pains strengthen us for doing justice?

Consider the experiences of women in our own church. Consider your own stories of struggle. Currently, the ELCA is gathering input from women and men across the church to develop a new social statement on the topic of Women and Justice. To that end, the ELCA has published a collection of testimonies from women about their experiences of sexism and oppression. It’s

called “Our Voices, Our Stories: Sexism in Church and Society.” You may wish to give time to read and digest this resource within your Bible-study group or on your own. You can find “Our Voices, Our Stories,” along with a discussion guide, here:

http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Our_Voices_Our_Stories.pdf

And yet...

READ PSALM 13 ALOUD ONCE AGAIN. Repeat verses 5–6, reading them together as a group.

After all that pleading and crying out, now the psalmist pledges her trust in Yahweh. To our ears it sounds like a dramatic change. Is she just crazy, or faithful? Both? Verse 5 explains, “my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.” In verses 1 and 2, it seemed her heart was about to break. But one verse need not cancel out the other. Our hearts often hold many convictions at once. This psalm opens up room for us to reflect on the layers of longings and commitments we hold simultaneously. Trust and grief can live side by side within us.

Many of us look up to teachers, mentors, family members and friends who have modeled faithfulness for us, those who have maintained a trust in God or strength in their convictions in spite of great trials. When friends of mine lost their first child to heart failure, they said, “We give thanks to God that she has been redeemed, even though we don’t understand how or why.” Even as their hearts were utterly broken, even as they could not understand their circumstances, they spoke of God’s redemption. I was amazed and humbled.

Is there someone you have known who has lived out a deep faith in the midst of pain and suffering? Is there a figure in history that lived this way? Has this psalm-writing experience become for you an example and practice of slow faith?

The Northumbria Community of Scotland illustrates faith-amidst-trials in this evening prayer:

EXPRESSIONS OF FAITH

Lord, You have always given
bread for the coming day;
and though I am poor,
today I believe.

Lord, You have always given
strength for the coming day;
and though I am weak,
today I believe.

Lord, You have always given
peace for the coming day;
and though of anxious heart,
today I believe.

Lord, You have always kept
me safe in trials;
and now, tried as I am,
today I believe.

Lord, You have always marked
the road for the coming day;
and though it may be hidden,
today I believe.

Lord, You have always lightened
this darkness of mine;
and though the night is here,
today I believe.

Lord, You have always spoken
when time was ripe;
and though you be silent now,
today I believe.

(Source: www.northumbriacommunity.org/offices/evening-prayer/)

Our voice, our prayer

The book of Psalms is considered the prayer book of the God's people. Could Psalm 13 be your own prayer? Does it give voice to longings in your spirit?

Try to write your own endings to verses 1–2. On a blank sheet of paper, write the phrase “how long” three or four times down the left side. Now, take time and try to complete the sentence with your own longings. Think about what you hope to see change in the world.

Try to put words to a prayer that has been held in your heart for a long time. If you can, name it here.

Within a trusting group of sisters in faith, trade your lists. You could cut the petitions you have written into strips and gather them in a basket. Draw out one by one, and pray them aloud.

Together, lift up and listen to the deep longings of your group. Speak one another's prayers tenderly and trustingly. You may wish to end your group psalm by



"Women Arriving at the Tomb"
© HeQi, 1999, www.heqiart.com

Marc Chagall, "Job at Prayer,"
1960 © 2015 Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris
© RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource,
NY

repeating the end of Psalm 13, "But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation." Or, you may wish to end in silence, maybe holding hands. End the time of prayer by sharing the peace.

Two images express deep longing in prayer. First, painter He Qi paints the women coming to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus only to find that "he is not here." Second, Marc Chagall depicts the long-suffering Job calling out to God for help.

What emotions do you notice in the body language of the women?
In the face of Job? What do the colors of the paintings communicate to you? Are there any phrases or images from Psalm 13 that you see expressed here? Can you detect any hints of God's reply? If you could give titles to these pieces, what would you call them? How can looking at these images meditatively be an example of slow faith?

A living faith in the God of time

Take three cleansing breaths.

READ THE THEME VERSE, PSALM 31:15, OUT LOUD:

"My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors."

In the gospels, Jesus calls his followers to "bear fruit worthy of the kingdom." In the next session, we will examine what Jesus' parables tell us about God's timing. Here in Psalm 31, the psalmist is once again crying out to God from a place of great suffering. When she reaches v. 14, she speaks of trust. And v. 15 describes her faith that God holds her in time ("my times are in your hand") and also responds to her pleas ("deliver me"). This is the paradox of faith: though we suffer, yet we trust. It is a gift from God and a calling for life. The calling Martin Luther King Jr. lived out expressed this tension in time: baptism called him to cry out against injustice *now*, while remaining grounded in a God who is loving and faithful *forever*.

The metaphor of fruit is a good one. A healthy fruit tree, cared for and nourished, will keep producing a

good yield. Here in Washington state, it is a sweet experience to walk among the cherry trees during the first week of July when they are simply bursting with ripe goodness. If we try to rush the fruit-bearing, we are met with sour results, unripe and tough. On the other hand, if we come to the cherry orchards in mid-August, the fruit is either gone or overripe. The cherries have fallen to the ground, eaten by animals or returned to the soil. The time came and went for picking and eating.

Such "right times" come to us as well. God, our provider and keeper, remains faithful always, like a skillful orchardist. The psalms help us give voice to our longing, our need for God to act. The parables we will look at in the next session help inspire us to act when the time is ripe. In all our days, we are cared for and called by a God who loves us *now* and *forever*.

Closing prayer: a poem

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives
may be,

I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the
great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

— Wendell Berry

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The Rev. Liv Larson Andrews is the pastor of Salem Lutheran in Spokane, Wash. She lives with her husband and two children, and dreams of hosting a lectionary-based cooking show.

A LEADER'S GUIDE

A goal for this Bible study is that the women gathered will wrestle with the limits of the “slow faith” idea, hearing cries for help from the psalms, from their neighbors and from their own hearts. As with Session 1, the leader should feel empowered to take as much time as is needed to really dwell with the topic. Though we may be called to “make haste,” we need not rush the work of sharing and listening to each other.

Making space

Tend to the environment in which the Bible study will happen. Spread simple fabric over tables, or light a candle in the middle of the room. Signal to those who come that this is a set apart place, a special place for deep sharing and thinking. If you would like to reference one of the themes in the study, you could set a table with abundant fruit, pointing to the quotation from Dr. King. Share the fruit as a snack or collect it for a nearby feeding ministry, trusting that “the time is always ripe to do right.”

Our voices

If you intend to use the suggested resource from the Women and Justice Task Force, “Our Voices, Our Stories,” have a few copies available for group members to read. Be ready for feedback and reactions. It may be that another session of your group’s meeting time needs to be called just to process and read through the stories in this collection. Or it may be valuable to collect stories from your own group about sexism in the church or in the world and submit them to the task force. It can be helpful to speak together to the church with one voice and ask, “How long?”

The DIY psalm

This session offers a prayer exercise in which the group creates its own psalm of lament and longing. The goal is that participants connect the longings of their own hearts with those of their ancestors in faith written down in the book of Psalms. In my experience, this can really allow deep and sincere prayers to flow forth. Take plenty of time to let group members ponder what they long for and how they might speak their longings before God.

If one reader is going to pray the psalm for the group, have them carefully read through the petition beforehand so that name pronunciations and such flow smoothly. Considering closing the psalm by praying, “But we trust in your steadfast love; our hearts rejoice in your salvation.” You could also use the “Expressions of Faith” poem to close the psalm.

Body language

The two paintings featured in the session offer pictures of bodies in prayer. You could use the paintings to start a discussion about body language and prayer. What do you do with your body when you pray? What meanings do different prayer postures have?

As a group, you could try out a few different postures: standing with arms open, kneeling with head bowed down, in a circle holding hands. Try talking to God in each posture. What changes? Does the act of prayer seem different?

As with Session 1, breathe. Share. Pray. Hold on to one another tenderly. Be blessed by the God who neither slumbers nor sleeps and does not tarry to help us in times of trouble.

THE JOURNEY FROM VICTIM TO SURVIVOR

by Rhonda Campbell Clay



IT shouldn't have been me. I was an educated, upwardly mobile professional. How could I have ended up in a courtroom, waiting to file an order of protection against my husband for domestic abuse?

Let me start from the beginning. Ours was a storybook romance: fell in love in high school, separated by colleges in different states, reconnected years later to marry and have the storybook family. Outwardly everything looked great. I was a mid-level manager at my job, on track with promotions, traveling across the world for work, with a nice car, a nice house, two children and a dog. Except that I was suffering from verbal and mental abuse. I was constantly talked down to and yelled at if other men looked at me or said I was attractive.

Everything came to a head after my husband threw something at me while I was holding our 6-month-old son, because I questioned him about going out that evening. "When I get back, I am going to beat your a**," he told me. It was then I decided that I would not raise my son in that environment and that I was leaving. However, it was not that simple.

I did leave that night, taking only a few clothes and items for my son. I checked into a hotel and hid out for a couple of days until I worked up the nerve to tell my

mother that I had left him and why. I thought that by filing for divorce it would be a smooth process. It was anything but. The next two years were a nightmare.

Know the patterns

You may be familiar with statistics showing that the most dangerous time for a woman in a domestic violence situation is when she leaves her abuser. It was true for me. Once I made the decision to leave, the verbal and mental abuse turned physical.

One night he kicked in my door and held me at gunpoint while our son was sleeping in his room. He held the phone (which he had snatched from me) and told me that he planned to shoot me and then himself, but he would allow me to call 911 so that someone could come find the baby. He asked me if there was anything I wanted to say before he did that. I told him I wanted to pray. As I sat on the floor, quietly crying and praying out loud, asking God to protect my son and comfort my parents, I even found the words to pray for my abuser. He was not “big into God,” as he said and scoffed at my prayer. I prayed for at least 10 minutes and as I prayed, I felt lighter. When I finished praying, he was gone. But that was not the end of the story.

My mother began to stay with me. My days went something like this: I got up in the morning with my mom and took my son to his daycare provider. My good friend met me there and we drove to work. At the end of the workday, we drove back to the daycare provider. My mom met us there and went home with my son and me and spent the night. This went on for months. My friend and I constantly looked in the rear-view mirror for vehicles to see if my husband was following us. One morning we did see him and detoured to the nearest police station to report him.

For two years my ex-husband stalked, hounded and harassed my son and me. He jumped out of bushes, hid in my backyard, kicked in my front door and held me at gunpoint several times.

Advocates are important

I was able to obtain an order of protection (after going to court repeatedly) when my friend who is a police officer referred me to an agency housed in her precinct. As I sat on her couch, crying, frustrated by the process of trying to obtain an order of protection, I heard her say: “There is a lady whom I work with ... I think she can help you.” The woman, Tara, was a domestic violence advocate with Family Rescue. She (and another woman named Jennifer) shepherded me through the process of obtaining the order and the subsequent court appearances.

If I had to describe Tara, I would say that she is a 6-foot 5-inch, 300-pound, fearless bulldog, housed in a petite 5-foot 1-inch woman. She stood next to me in hallways, courtrooms, parking lots and any time I felt afraid. She answered my calls at all hours of the day and night. She went with me to court when the judge threw out my order of protection because he said if I had answered the phone when my ex called he wouldn’t have come to my house to beat me, drag me down concrete stairs and try to kidnap our child. She wiped my tears as I cried that day. She helped me through counseling for my son and me as we began to recover from the trauma of abuse.

Then there was the Sunday morning when I decided that I was going to take my life back and stop living in fear. I was sitting in church with my mom. It was the Sunday after Easter, and a seminary student was preaching about the disciples waiting in the upper room—waiting to hear what had happened to Jesus. As the student talked about what it must have been like in that room until the Holy Spirit arrived and blessed through all of them, I thought about how I often sat in my room at night, sleepless, waiting to hear a car drive by or footsteps on my porch, wondering if tonight was the night that he would get in and kill me. That morning I decided I would no longer live that way. I prayed for God to protect my son, my family and me. I prayed

that I would accept God's will. After church I told my mom she could go home to my dad. She refers to that day as the day I "got brave."

As scary as all of this was, I had a wonderful support system. My workplace allowed me to take the time I needed to go to court (repeatedly over an extended period) to pursue charges and my divorce. His picture was posted with human resources and security officers in the building so that when he tried to come to my office (and he did try), both building security and the police department were on call to handle him. My friends were supportive, providing places for my son and me to stay when we were afraid, even opening their homes in the middle of the night. My parents stood by me, even when I couldn't stand on my own. My pastor was supportive and even came to court with me on one occasion. Most important, all of these people prayed for and with me.

What can you do?

People often ask how to help when they suspect that a loved one is in an abusive situation. My advice? Offer them a non-judgmental place to talk. Help them think through an escape plan. Most important, pray with and for them.

My friends told me: "If you need a place to go, I am here for you." "If you need to talk, I am here for you." They never asked, "Why do you stay?" They never judged me before or after I left.

Find out what resources are available in your area. Help your loved one to access those resources. My biggest fear was that I might have to go into a shelter with my son.

My friends and family made sure that I didn't have to—even when it meant hiding my car and me so that I could be safe.

As I look back on that time in my life, I often say that the only way I survived those years was through the grace of God, my family and my domestic violence advocates, Tara and Jennifer.

Today I have moved through the storm. I no longer view myself as a *victim* of domestic violence. I am a *survivor*. I am happily married to a good Christian man (Lutheran, like me), who loves my son and me unconditionally. He's accepted me with all of my baggage attached. He's loved me through all of my doubts that I could be loved and my fears that things would never be different. He prays for our family without ceasing. He is my promise in the rainbow.

I've learned something that everyone should learn: Domestic violence does not discriminate. It affects people in all walks of life, every race or ethnicity, every social and economic level, and every gender. Anyone can fall victim to abuse. It is my hope that after reading this story, someone else will become a survivor.

To my sisters in the struggle who have not yet crossed the threshold to survivor, stay strong, keep praying and reach out for help. I know from experience that there are good people in good organizations who will help you get out. Most important, stay safe.



Rhonda Campbell Clay, a communication and fundraising professional, is a native of Chicago who now resides in Knoxville, Tenn., with her awesome 16-year-old son and her loving, supportive husband.

The author today, strong and safe

RESOURCES

The National Domestic Violence Hotline:

www.thehotline.org

800-799-SAFE (7233)

National Network to End Domestic Violence

(to find resources and local organizations)

www.nnedv.org

FOR YOUTH

Love is respect

www.loveisrespect.org

866-331-9474 or text loveis to 22522



EARTH WISE

Easy

by Terry L. Bowes

It is pretty predictable.

When first-time visitors see the horses in our pasture, they ask to ride. When I ask them if they know how to ride, they are quick to say yes. It takes a mere two minutes for us to realize that the only riding they have done has been on jaded trail horses. The dead giveaway is when they clutch the saddle horn while shouting "Giddy up!" I could swear that the horse winks at me as it takes off in a jarring, stiff-legged trot, intended to make the greenhorn miserable.

Sure enough, wanting the horse to slow down, the panic-stricken rider hauls back on the reins and hollers, "Whoa!" The horse immediately comes to a full stop, just as it has been trained. The unbalanced rider tumbles unceremoniously over the horse's shoulder and gets a mouthful of arena dirt.

Our horses have been taught that "whoa" means stop. Come to a complete stop, do not pass go; do not collect \$200.

Since the word "slow" sounds so much like "whoa," we use the word "easy" for "slow down." There is a big difference between slowing down and stopping altogether, for people as well as horses.

"Easy" is a calming word. I use it with mares with newborn foals. It means: "Calm down, Mama. I'm not going to hurt him." Later I use it with that colt as he begins his training. "Easy" is a word that inspires faith in the horses. The basic instinct of any horse when it is startled is to flee. "Easy" lets the horse know that there is nothing to fear. I will

protect it. A gentle touch on the neck reinforces the word. Similarly, God's gentle touch on my head reminds me to go easy.

In reining competitions, the horse and rider are required to run a pattern with a variety of quick and slow movements, fast and slow circles, quick 180-degree turns, fast, accurate spins, stopping on a dime. I am always impressed when after making a series of lightning fast spins the horse is expected to "stop and settle." The rider reinforces the command with a gentle touch on the horse's neck.

When life gets crazy and muddled, I often have to remind myself to take it easy. I have to take a deep breath and stop and settle. Working in the garden usually provides me that sense of calm. It is my time for meditation and prayer. But now, in October, as the Harvest Moon is rising slowly, I move in double time to keep up in the garden and the kitchen.

This is the busiest time of year for a grower. The tomato seedlings that I fussed over in March are yielding pounds of fruit. When those tomatoes, peppers, zucchini and cucumbers are ripe, there is no time to waste. Ready crops have no patience and refuse to hear my pleading for a little more time. They don't understand "easy." We move swiftly, harvesting and preserving and wondering what possessed us to plant such a huge garden.

I'll be grateful for those tomatoes in January when I drop a few into a crock pot of chili.

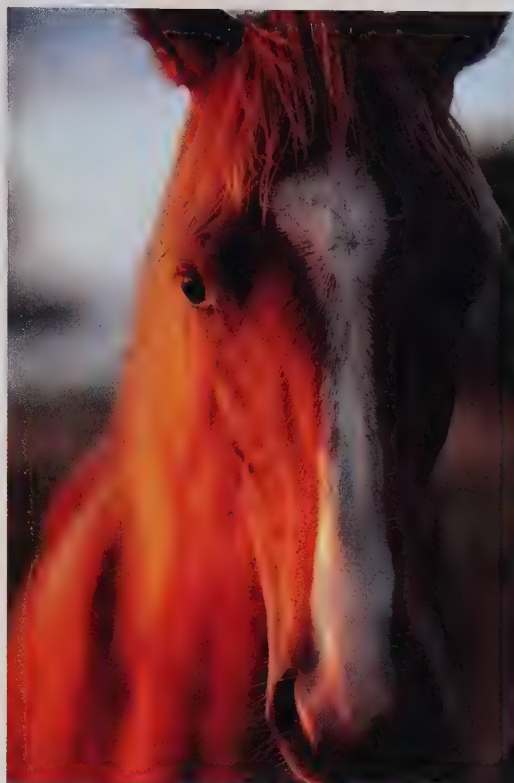
I love my slow cooker. The gentle click when I turn the knob from “off” to “low” is an immensely satisfying sound. In my slow cooker the flavors of all the ingredients have the time and space to intermingle and complement each other. Congregations and communities have the capacity to do the same thing: celebrate their diversity.

Nothing makes me feel more secure than coming home to the aroma of supper cooking. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians of experiencing similar joy: “But thanks be to God, who, in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.” (2 Corinthians 2:14–15)

My slow cooker gives me the opportunity to pre-plan and prepare so that I can enjoy the payoff of having that soup or stew ready for dinner. It certainly beats an uninspired hunt through the pantry for ideas at six o’clock in the evening. It makes my life, well, easy.

We Lutherans are well-known for our potlucks, our “hot dishes.” My dear friend Sharroll uses her slow cooker to make soup for her local soup kitchen. We cook not solely for ourselves, but for others, those who would go hungry without us.

In her book *The Gift of Years*, Joan Chittister remarks that “we live in a world that judges its achievements by speed and busyness.” When asked how their lives are, many people will respond



with a sigh and roll of the eyes, “Busy.” It is easy to forget that busyness does not equate to holiness. Multitasking is not all that it is cracked up to be. Training our eyes and attention on our cell phones and tablets gets in the way of looking into someone else’s eyes.

Now, in the slow cooker of my life, I have the luxury of time to be able to listen. What is it that is keeping you so busy? What helps you to “stop and settle?” I cannot pass judgment. I know that my daughter and her friends balance employment with marriage and raising children and keeping track of their schooling and activities. They are busy with a capital B. My question needs to be: How can I help? How can I make life easy for you? 🌿

Terry L. Bowes gardens, grandmothers and gathers near Longmont, Colo.

To bless the world around us

follow in the way of St. Francis

by Kim Winchell

I will freely confess it: I am a huge fan of Saint Francis, and yes, I am a life-long Lutheran. I have my very own Francis statue out back, with birds in his arms and a fawn at his feet. I would wager that many of us do. I even have several Francis-can saint cards, with traditional depictions of Francis preaching to the birds or making peace with that Wolf of Gubbio.

There is something so attractive about this humble, gentle little man of God, often claimed as the Patron Saint of Ecology or Patron Saint of Animals. This is particularly true for those of us who cherish our pet companions and creation and all its creatures.

Saint Francis Day (October 4) falls this year on a Sunday. A goodly number of congregations will no doubt host a "Blessing of the Pets" service on or around that date. If your congregation has not held one before, why not give it a try? Open the event to your surrounding neighborhood or community—it can be a delightful evangelism opportunity. If not this year, begin now to make a plan for next year www.letallcreationpraise.org/unitedstatesecumenicalspiritseriesa.

In my experience, this kind of commemoration of Saint Francis brings great blessing, comfort and joy to the pet owners; and the animals themselves often seem to sense, in some deeper way, what we are trying to do. I have seen such a look of calm peace and gratitude in their eyes (well, maybe not with the pet snake one little boy had—but with dogs and older pets, you bet).

It can also be moving to offer prayers of thanksgiving for beloved pets that have died, if a participant has



chosen to bring along a photo of a dear, departed animal companion. Be prepared, also, to bless a little child's favorite stuffed animal. It can be a time of celebration, blessing and joyful fellowship for all.

For many of us, a pet companion becomes a special source of joy and love—a furry or feathered family member. Could a celebration of Saint Francis' love for creatures provide an opening for sharing such stories with one another? Imagine the richness of those conversations in your women's groups and circles. Share the photos, share the tales and ponder the ways in which God touched you through that pet—and the ways that pet brought out the best in you as you cared for it.

Luther: saints as examples

Here, I am taking Martin Luther's words to heart that "...our people teach that the saints are to be remembered so that we may strengthen our faith when we see how they experienced grace and how they were helped by faith. Moreover, it is taught that each person, according to his or her calling, should take the saints' good works as an example." (Augsburg Confession, XXI:1)

I wonder how many Lutherans realize that there are even several orders of Lutheran Franciscans. (See www.lutheranfranciscans.org)

Beyond the blessing of pets on and around October 4, Saint Francis offers us a pathway of discipleship marked by joy, peace, simplicity, humility, compassion and loving relationships; care for the poor; and kinship with the creatures of this world. Does not our world

Today desperately need that kind of witness, peace-filled relationships and deeper healing?

The world seems too often marred by the destruction of natural places, extinction of species, climate change, the effects of climate change, and the general hardness of hearts and cruelty of actions among and between members of the human family.

Following the example of Saint Francis is, to be sure, about kindness toward creatures and love for God's creation. But it can also be about so much more: *pax et bonum*, "peace and all good" wished upon all whom we encounter, flowing from our own love of Jesus, and our Lord's love and blessings for all of us and creation. At its heart, it is discipleship lived out in earnest, joyful and at times prophetic yet humble ways.

As Robert Saler writes in a reflection for Saint Francis Day on the Lutherans Restoring Creation website (www.lutheransrestoringcreation.org): "The beauty of Jesus and Francis comes from the fact that they showed how deep tenderness towards creation and passionate advocacy against injustice go hand in hand. Such beauty is the kind that acts in harmony with the Spirit to heal God's good earth."

Dedicated to following Christ

In 1979 Pope John Paul II "named Saint Francis of Assisi the patron saint of those who promote ecology because he recognized the importance of his God-centered life for our modern age. He gave formal recognition to the popular perception of Francis' relationship with nature as ecologically ideal. Saints are models of holiness worthy of studying and following. Saints can help shape us into the disciples we desire to be. Francis is one such saint, perhaps the most popular saint of all time. His universal appeal lies in his simplicity of heart, his dedication to the following of Christ, his love of the poor and his fellowship with all creatures." (*Care for Creation: A Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth*, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2008)

More recently, of course, we have also the words and witness of Pope Francis, who often seems to embody the fuller aspects of the life and example of Saint Francis, with his own deep humility, joy, simplicity, compassion, care for the poor and lepers of our day, and his promotion of peace and justice. Pope Francis, by his actions, reminds people across the globe that there is more to Saint Francis than his love for creatures.

At the same time, however, this pope has also become known for his strong statements about caring for creation.

A movement known as the Catholic Climate Covenant (<http://catholicclimatecovenant.org/catholicteachings/popefrancis>) has been compiling a collection of Pope Francis' comments on the environment. Many people all over the world appreciate the public voice and attention the pope can bring to such matters.

We may lack such a voice and widespread audience. And yet there is always something each of us can do to be a part of the healing of the world—and to be a bearer of Christ's reconciling love to the spaces, places, creatures and human families around us. As Francis taught:

"All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of a single candle."

Share the love, share the light; strive for peace and justice throughout the earth. Bless those pets; love one another; be joyful; be humble.

Saint Francis was also known to preach that "I have done what is mine to do. May Christ teach you what is yours." That gets to the heart of the Lutheran understanding of vocation and ministry in daily life, doesn't it?

And so, good and gentle people, what is yours to do to help spread God's "peace and all good" into the world? Blessings upon your discoveries, and may the Spirit give you courage and joy. 🌿

Kim Winchell is a diaconal minister, spiritual director and retreat leader. She lives in mid-Michigan.

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RACE NOTES

Everything is so previous

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



I was at the hair salon

last May, getting my hair washed before a cut, when another woman sat down at the bowl next to me. She and the woman washing her hair were quite chatty, and I couldn't help but overhear their conversation. The customer was a teacher looking forward to the end of the school year. She taught at a parochial school that wouldn't be done until mid-June. This led the two next to me to talk about other endings and observances, how people don't live in the moment so much, but rather seem to focus on the next thing on the horizon.

"Everything is so previous," the teacher said.

It's true. Before the hazy, lazy days of summer have settled in, back-to-school sales begin. Before trick-or-treaters get any candy, Christmas music is playing in stores and holiday displays are up. Many people take down their Christmas trees on December 26, an official end to the holiday, when the twelve days of Christmas have only just begun.

This phenomenon is not just driven by marketing and sales. It's as if, in our 24/7 world, society compels us to live on constant fast forward. How exhausting is that? Can we truly even appreciate anything if we're constantly thinking ahead to the next big idea or event?

Whether you experience Sabbath living by observing a full day of Sabbath or by finding Sabbath moments in every day, Sabbath living is the antidote to the teacher's observance that "everything is so previous."

The author Annie Dillard reminds us that "how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." Or as humorist Will Rogers said: "half our life is spent trying to find something to do with the time we have rushed through life trying to save."

When you come together with women this month, whether it's to engage in this month's Bible study or a gathering fueled by coffee or tea, I invite you to think about time. Who taught you to manage time? What's your attitude about time? What is "free time" to you? How did you and your family spend the last few Sundays? Were Sunday activities different when you were growing up?

Think about your congregational unit of Women of the ELCA. If the women making up that unit are all living on constant fast forward, is your unit doing the same? Is your unit constantly thinking ahead to the next big idea or event? Do you ever come together and simply sit in prayer? Do you build in time during your meetings to cease the hurriedness and simply listen to each other and learn about the needs of each? What would Sabbath living look like for your congregational unit?

Don't get me wrong. There's definitely a role for planning and looking forward to the future. But when those things happen at the expense of living in the here and now, we fail to receive the gift of Sabbath. 🌿

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

Slow enough to grow

by Catherine Malotky

Normally, life moves

forward without much ado. Mornings and evenings pass, as do the seasons and then years. We can tell the story of these times with broad strokes, naming our joys and sadness, but time moves forward, and we are along for the ride. Wasn't it just yesterday that the confirmand was a baby?

Suffering, however, changes everything. Time slows way, way down. Every pain is exacerbated, whether its origin is in the body or the soul. We long for relief, to be released back into our normal lives.

Dear God, why is this so? Why can't time speed up when we are hurting?

There have been such times in my life. The loss of ones I love. The inevitable loss of my younger self. The loss of dreams of who I might become. The loss of innocence when confronted with things I did not want to believe. The loss of harmony and peace.

When I am in such wilderness places and I have lost my sense of direction, it's hard to interpret what's happening. Familiar landscapes seem strange. I am off balance.

When grief over my daughter's death became suffocating, a counselor offered wise words. "Are you getting dressed most days? Are you eating? Taking some sort of care of your family? Responding when people talk to you?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Good for you!" she said. "Your loss could have trapped you inside, stopped you cold, but you are finding something in you to keep moving forward, no mat-

ter how impaired you feel." She gave me permission to be slow, feel and cry. She invited me to abandon words, so much my bread and butter, and let movement express what was so painfully acute in my soul. It was the grace to live into my grief to give myself time.

God, I grew. We grow though through wilderness experiences. They have a profound capacity to invite us into new understandings, new insights, new appreciations. They can be the best of teachers, precisely because we are slow enough to see and hear and learn.

And when we are impatient for a better world, when we feel the losses others bear, our sense of justice can fire us forward. But even in these moments taking time to lean into the chaos and injustice can teach us to reach beyond our righteous indignation and find a deeper inspiration to accompany those whose lives seem most impacted. We see them not as sufferers only, but as brothers and sisters who deserve a full measure of God's goodness.

How long, God? How long? In your good time, you will redeem our wilderness places. You will help us find a way through the valley of the shadow of death. You will shine a light so we can see. You will call us into new life, as you have promised, and you will call us into service as you have served. Help us trust in you. In Jesus' name. Amen. 🌿

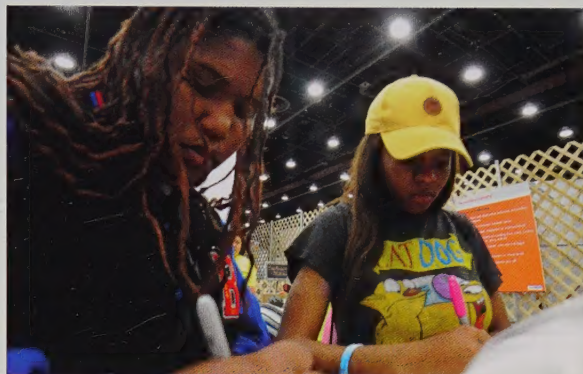
The Rev. Catherine Malotky, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropy adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, educator, teacher, and retreat leader.

WELCA at the Youth Gathering

Women of the ELCA had an exhibit at the ELCA Youth Gathering in Detroit, Mich., July 15-19. Women of the ELCA units helped youth gather in-kind gifts such as nearly 1 million diapers and baby wipes for a diaper dispensary. Women of the ELCA units gave nearly \$10,000 for the purchase of hygiene and other supplies that youth gathering participants assembled into more than 1,500 kits for seven organizations that help victims of trafficking. Many of the 30,000 youth who attended the event also brought and organized in-kind gifts—a big job.



Lexy Grenier, 17, St. Mark's Lutheran, Grand Forks, N.D., places a box of diapers that she and the Women of the ELCA group in her church helped to collect.



Icecess Williams and Elizabeth Wilkerson, Bethel Lutheran Church, Chicago, Ill., write words of encouragement to place with in-kind gifts at the Women of the ELCA exhibit at the ELCA Youth Gathering.

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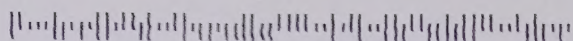
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